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WHAT PERSPECTIVES FOR ARCHAEOLOGY TODAY
IN EGYPT? THE CASE OF SOKNOPAIU NESOS
(DIME ES-SEBA¹)

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Abstract

The article focuses on some problems of archaeological work in Egypt today, in the light of the experience gained during 18 years of work at Dime es-Seba (Fayyum, Egypt).

Keywords

Archaeology, Dime es-Seba, Fayyum

In this presentation I would like to set out certain considerations based on 25 years of experience as the director of the Archaeological Mission run by the Centre of Papyrological Studies at the University of the Salento, which has worked on two sites dated to the Greek and Roman periods in the pseudo-oasis of Fayyum in Egypt. I will focus here on the second of these sites, which the Mission has been excavating since 2004 under the direction of myself and Paola Davoli: Soknopaiou Nesos (which the Egyptians call Dime es-Seba)², situated two kilometres to the north of Lake Qarun, the Lake Moeris cited by Herodotus. Soknopaiou Nesos was a village founded in the 3rd century BC centred on a mud brick temple situated on a hill. The temple was dedicated to Soknopaios, the crocodile god with the head of a falcon, whose oracle drew people from all over the region. The village was abandoned by its inhabitants in the 3rd century AD. The name of the village means “the Island of Soknopaios”, and was probably derived from the presence of an island in the nearby lake. In its heyday (1st and 2nd centuries AD) the village was inhabited by about 3000 people. It was abandoned when the sources of fresh water dried up, or because, with the arrival of Christianity in the region, the oracle of the god had lost its importance, removing the village’s main source of wealth. From the 4th to the 7th centuries AD, the site was occupied once more, albeit for a limited period, by a group of people who we believe to have been a

² On work carried out by our Missione in Dime es-Seba cf. M. CAPASSO-P. DAVOLI (eds.), *Soknopaiou Nesos Project. I (2003-2009)*, Pisa-Roma 2012 and [www.museo papirologico.eu].

monastic community who settled in what had been the sacred area. In the centre of this area was the stone temple dedicated to the god Soknopaios, built during the shift from the Ptolemaic to the Roman period against the old mud-brick temple, which became a sort of vestibule to the new sanctuary.

Today the site is in reasonable condition: long stretches of the *temenos* wall, which separated the sacred area from the rest of the village, are still conserved, reaching heights of fifteen metres in places, and are clearly visible even from a distance of some kilometres.

Why did we choose to excavate this site? Mainly because Soknopaiou Nesos is a key location in the history of papyrology. In the 1880s and 1890s, after the archaeological wealth of the site became clear, it was the object of numerous excavations, both official and unauthorised, which led to the discovery of an enormous quantity of Greek and Demotic papyri that were acquired in various ways by western institutions. The only excavation that can be considered properly scientific was conducted in a single three-month campaign in 1931-1932 by the Mission of the University of Michigan, directed by Arthur E.R. Boak. The work was divided into two sectors, to the east and west of the *dromos*, i.e. the processional road that led from the southern gate of the *temenos* to the southern limit of the village. After this brief American experience had been concluded, the site was abandoned and once again became the object of unauthorised looting. It thus seemed to be a good idea to conduct a scientific archaeological investigation of the settlement, which, in addition to being an important religious centre, played a strategic role in commercial terms, given that it was situated at the entrance to Fayyum and therefore served as a staging post for the caravans heading from the large western oases to Alexandria and vice versa. This was a somewhat courageous decision, given that the site lies in the middle of the desert, about 30 kilometres west of the desert road that links Cairo to Fayyum, and at the time was reachable only during daylight hours, via a bumpy track that was completely covered by sand in many places. Its distance from inhabited areas has certainly helped to conserve the site over the centuries. Indeed, the absence of human impact on the surrounding area has shielded it from factors that would undoubtedly have been deleterious for the site's delicate structures, mostly made of mud bricks. Such factors include agriculture, sewage and drainage systems, expansion of inhabited areas and the modern cemetery, traffic pollution and the removal of ancient architectural materials in order to recycle them in modern constructions. However, its very remoteness entailed a series of logistical and organisational difficulties for us that were not easy to resolve. It is no coincidence that the Mission of the University of Michigan had to abandon the site after three months' work due to economic difficulties and problems of

water supply. Setting up an archaeological mission in Soknopaiou Nesos means persuading the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities to provide security at the site, in order to protect it from unauthorised excavations and thus conserve it. A unit of security guards was indeed deployed to the ruins, naturally at our expense, but the looting continued, as we notice every time we return to the site. Clearly the surveillance is neither continuous nor particularly attentive. Another risk for the site's conservation is posed by "desert tourists", who arrive from Cairo at weekends and inflict damage on the fragile mud brick structures, without undue hindrance from the guards. In the past and unfortunately even now, people even drove around the ruins in cars or on motorbikes: the notices warning that motorised vehicles are forbidden from entering the site and urging respect for the ruins are all too frequently ignored. In order to prevent these motorised "raids", the best solution would be to build a perimeter wall around the archaeological area. However, this would be very hard to achieve in practice (the circumference of the site measures about 3 kilometres) and is not ideal from the aesthetic point of view, since a series of concrete blocks surmounted by steel fencing would not exactly be in harmony with the surrounding archaeological landscape.

On the margins of the region of Fayyum there are abundant remains of settlements dated to the Greek and Roman periods, as well as some from the Coptic and Islamic eras. Currently isolated in the desert, they are at risk of disappearing, preyed upon by looters or affected by efforts to reclaim the land for cultivation. Setting up an archaeological mission in these settlements would certainly contribute to their salvation or at least delay their destruction, which in many cases appears inevitable. It is a task that archaeology should not shy away from.

Our mission did not seek and does not seek to discover papyri, or rather, it is not aimed exclusively at the search for papyri or other objects. The intention is to study the urban, architectural, social and religious character of the village as a whole, by means of a rigorously stratigraphic archaeological investigation. Luckily the days when the only aim of Egyptian archaeology was the discovery of objects, by which the success of any excavation was judged, are long gone.

The first issue we tackled was the choice of where to excavate. We decided to work inside the sacred area, partly because it had never been scientifically investigated and partly due to the presence of remains of walls that seemed to belong to a large temple building. A big problem that we immediately had to resolve was the presence of a large number of very heavy limestone blocks that formed the roof of the building, which, having fallen to the ground, now completely covered the area: It was not possible to make use of mechanical cranes for their removal, since bringing bulldozers, diggers and similar

machinery into the sacred area would obviously have entailed the destruction of the delicate structures situated within it. It was necessary therefore to move them manually, which naturally involved, among other problems, a considerable amount of time. Today, unfortunately, bulldozers are often used by looters to rapidly demolish archaeological sites in the search for treasures.

For a few years now it has been easier to reach the site, thanks to the large asphalted road that runs from Karanis/Kom Aushim to Alexandria and the western oases. From this highway another road runs almost as far as Soknopaïou Nesos. In 14 difficult campaigns we have managed to bring to light what remains of the stone temple, which was dedicated to the god Soknopaios and the two *synnaoi theoi* Isis Nephersès and Soknopieios/-Soknopiais, the latter also a crocodile divinity. We have also brought to light a structure abutting the north wall of the temple, which has been found to be a *contra-temple*, inside which we discovered the scale model that provided the point of reference for its construction. The model was a highly significant discovery, given that in Egypt very few have been found. We do not know who the *contra-temple* was dedicated to, but on the basis of certain clues we believe that it may have been dedicated to Soknopaios and Isis Nephersès. We also sought to clean and order the *dromos*, the processional road that was raised a few metres above the ground, underneath which we discovered two tunnels that enabled the inhabitants to move from one side of the village to the other. Of the two tunnels, we excavated the one in better condition. We were not able to touch the other because of the risk of collapse. In this case a preliminary study by an engineer is necessary. Restoration is one of the biggest problems affecting Egyptian archaeology. Often we find ourselves faced with a dilemma: do we suspend the excavation and dedicate our efforts to restoring what we have brought to light, or do we continue to excavate in order to bring to light as much as possible and thus increase our knowledge of the site? It should be pointed out that the site's remoteness from the nearest town entails considerable difficulties for the organisation of an adequate restoration of the mud brick structures. Until now we have chosen to approach the restoration by means of a series of relatively small-scale targeted measures, such as the repair of the damages produced by illegal excavators or the repair of some of the limestone blocks from the temple which cracked after being brought to light. This type of limestone, which is common in the archaeological sites of Fayyum, is a particularly fragile material which cracks on coming into contact with moisture in the atmosphere and as a consequence of diurnal temperature variation. It is not possible to use chemical substances to consolidate the blocks, given that both the sand and the blocks themselves are particularly rich in salt, making it necessary to intensively pre-wash them in order to eliminate the salt. Such an

operation would however require the use of a large quantity of water, which would be particularly difficult to transport to the site. Even the restoration work consisting of levelling off the mud brick walls by laying new bricks with the same composition as the ancient ones is highly problematic, for economic, practical and logistical reasons. With a view to a full-scale restoration of the site and the organisation of an adequate system for welcoming visitors, our mission has presented a project entitled “Fayyum Heritage Experience”, financed by the European Union: Unfortunately the work has not yet begun due to the slowness of Egyptian bureaucracy.

A further grave threat to the site comes from the many construction and development projects, some linked to tourism, affecting the entire region of Fayyum and the area north of the lake. The risk they pose (or at least some of them pose) is that the need to adequately conserve the site of Soknopaiou Nesos and its surrounding territory – so rich in evidence of settlements dated to epochs from prehistory to the Middle Ages, not to mention its landscape and geology – from a massive and chaotic urbanisation will not receive adequate consideration. Meanwhile it is crucial that the Egyptian Authorities accelerate and support the procedures for adding the archaeological sites of Fayyum to the UNESCO list of World Heritage, which since 2005 has included Wadi al-Khitan, the “Valley of the Whales”.

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